

GEORGES BATAILLE

Letter to René Char on the Incompatibilities of the Writer*

My dear friend,

The question that you have asked, "Are there any incompatibilities?" has taken on for me the meaning of a long-awaited summons. It is a summons I was losing hope of ever receiving. I perceive more clearly each day how the world in which we live limits its desires to the needs of sleep. But one *word* summons at the right time a kind of recueil, of renewed energy.

It happens frequently enough these days that the end seems near. At this time the need to forget, to cease to react, prevails over the desire to continue living. . . . To reflect about the inevitable, or to try to sleep no longer. . . . Sleep seems preferable. We have witnessed the submission of those overwhelmed by too weighty a situation. Were those who cried out, however, any more awake? What is coming is so strange, so vast, so little commensurate with expectations. . . . At a time when the destiny which leads men is taking on a human shape, the majority is giving itself over to absence. Those who seem resolute or menacing, whose every word is but a mask, have voluntarily lost themselves in a night of the intellect. Yet the night in which the rest of the earth now sleeps is pitch-black: the dogmatic slumber of some contrasts with the bloodless confusion of others—a chaos of innumerable grey voices that are wearing themselves out before their drowsy listeners.

Perhaps my vain irony is itself a way to sleep more soundly. . . . Yet I write, I speak, and can only rejoice in the opportunity to *respond*

*This letter to René Char appeared in *Botthege Oscure*, May 1950, and can now be found in vol. 12 of OC. Reprinted with permission of the Beinecke Rare Book and Library, Yale University, and of Editions Gallimard © 1988.

YFS 78, *On Bataille*, ed. Allan Stockl, © 1990 by Yale University.

to you, and even together with you, to *desire* the moment of wakefulness when this universal confusion will, at last, no longer be acceptable; a confusion which now makes of thought a forgetting, a foolishness, the barking of a dog in church.

Moreover, in responding to the question that you have set forth, I feel as though I have finally reached the adversary—an adversary which assuredly is not someone or other, but is existence itself in its entirety, engulfing, lulling, and drowning *desire*,—and that I have attained it finally in the right place. You invite, you provoke one to emerge from the confusion. . . . Perhaps it is an excess which announces that the time has come. How, in the end, is it possible to endure *actions*, that *in such unfortunate guises*, succeed in “effacing” life? Yes, perhaps the time has now come to denounce subordination, that servile attitude with which human life is incompatible—an attitude accepted since time immemorial, but whose excess today obliges us to detach ourselves lucidly. Lucidly! It is, of course, without the least hope.

In fact, to speak in this manner is surely to risk misunderstanding. You, however, know me to be as far from dejection as from hope. I have chosen simply to *live*. I am always astonished by men who, fired-up and eager to act, look down upon the pleasure of living. These men obviously confuse action with life without ever seeing that, while action is the necessary means for the maintenance of life, the only admissible act is the act that effaces itself (or in extreme circumstances prepares to efface itself) before the “burning diversity” of which you speak, and which cannot and never can be reduced to what is useful.

The difficulty of subordinating action to its end stems from the fact that the only admissible action is the most efficacious. Hence, the initial advantage of immoderately giving oneself over to it, of lying and of unrestrained conduct. If all men permitted themselves to act only to the extent that necessity dictates to their total being, falsehood and brutality would be superfluous. It is the overflowing propensity to action and the ensuing rivalries, which increase the efficacy of liars and of the blind. Moreover, given the circumstances, we can do nothing to extricate ourselves—to remedy the evil of excessive action, one has to, or would have, to act! We do nothing more than verbally and vainly condemn those who betray and blind their own kind. Everything, in all this vanity, takes a turn for the worse. No one can condemn action except through silence,—or through poetry,

which opens, as it were, its window onto silence. To denounce, to protest, is also to act, and at the same time, it is to shy away from the exigencies of action!

It seems to me that we shall never sufficiently indicate a basic incompatibility of this *life without measure*, a life which alone counts, which alone is the meaning of all humanity, and consequently, of *measureless action* itself. I am speaking by and large of what, beyond productive activity, and, in our disorder, is the analogue of holiness. Action can obviously have value only *in so far* as it has humanity as its "raison d'être." It rarely, however, accepts this measure for, of all the opiums, action brings the heaviest sleep. The place action occupies makes one think of those trees that hide the forest, that profess to be the forest itself.

For this reason, it seems fitting for us to oppose equivocation, and, *being unable to act truly*, for us to slip away without further ado. I say *we*, but I am thinking of you, of myself, of those who resemble us. Leave the dead to the dead (barring the impossible), and action (if it is possible) to those who passionately confuse it with life.

By this I do not mean that all action ought to be relinquished regardless of what may happen. For undoubtedly we should never fail to oppose criminal or unreasonable actions, but we must clearly recognize the following: because rational and admissible action (from the general standpoint of humanity) becomes, as we might have foreseen, the lot of those who act *without measure*, and which therefore runs the risk, a rational one at first, of being changed dialectically into its opposite, we can only hope to oppose it on the condition that we substitute ourselves, or rather, that we have the heart and the strength to substitute ourselves, for those whose methods we do not fancy.

Blake says somewhere that "to speak without acting is to breed pestilence."

The incompatibility of a life without measure and immoderate action is, in my eyes, decisive. We are touching upon that problem whose "conjuring away" contributes without a doubt to the present blind advance of all humanity. Though at first it might seem peculiar, I believe that this conjuring away was the inevitable consequence of the weakening of religion. Religion formulated this particular problem of incompatibility which, moreover, was its unique problem. Little by little, however, it was abandoned to secular thought which *did not yet know how to formulate it*. We cannot regret this, for

religion, having posed the problem from a position of authority, posed it badly. Above all, it did so ambiguously—in the beyond. The principle of action remained bound to *this* world. . . . All of action's true aims remained celestial. It is for us, finally, to formulate the problem in its rigorous dimensions.

Your question then, after my too general affirmation, compels me to specify the present facts and scope of the incompatibility which seems fundamental to me.

Although the debate concerning literature and "engagement" appears to have subsided, its decisive nature has not yet been clearly perceived. All the more reason then not to leave it at that. First of all, it is important to define just what propels the phenomenon of literature which cannot be made to serve a master. *NON SERVIAM* is said to be the devil's motto. If this is so, then literature is diabolical.

At this point I would like to set aside all reserve and allow passion to speak. This is not an easy task, for it implies a resignation to the impotence of desires that are too intense. Insofar as my discourse is due to passion itself, I would like to avoid any recourse to reason's tired means of expression. Be that as it may, *you* will be able to perceive how vain and even impossible this resolution seems to me. Would it be too vague if I said that at the thought of speaking sagaciously about these matters, I experience a great discomfort? Nevertheless, I am writing to you, you who will see through the weakness of these reasonable words to what reason can grasp only in an illusory way.

First of all, let me affirm that I honestly know nothing about what I am, or what my fellow men are, or what the world in which we live might be—impenetrable appearance, paltry light vacillating in a night without conceivable bounds that surrounds us in every direction. I am clinging in my astonished helplessness to a cord. I do not know if I love the night. Perhaps I do, for fragile human beauty moves me in that disquieting way only when I understand that the night from whence it comes, and into which it goes, is unfathomable. How I *love* the distant outline that men have ceaselessly left of themselves in this darkness! That far-off image delights me. I love it, and I often feel the pain from loving it too much. Humanity, sordid or tender, and always *astray*, even in its miseries, its stupidity, and crimes, presents an intoxicating defiance. It isn't Shakespeare who suffered those heartrending cries, it is HUMANITY. Little matter if HUMANITY endlessly betrays itself, and in so doing, betrays what is greater than

itself. HUMANITY is most touching in its inanity when night grows filthier, when the horror of night turns its creatures into a vast heap of rubbish.

One speaks about the "unbearable" universe that I portray in my books, as though I were displaying my open wounds the way the wretched do. It is true that, on the surface, I like to deny, or at least to neglect or discount, the multiple recourses which help us to *endure*. I scorn them less perhaps than it would appear, but I most certainly hasten to *give back* my own small portion of life to that which *divinely* slips away before us, and which slips away from the will to reduce the world to the efficacy of reason. I have nothing against reason and rational order, for in the numerous cases where it is clearly opportune, like everyone else, I am in favor of them both. Nevertheless, I do not know whether anything in this world has ever appeared *adorable* which did not exceed the functions of utility, did not wreak havoc upon and benumb as it charmed, and, in short, was not at the extreme limit of endurance. I, who know myself to be clearly limited to atheism, am perhaps wrong for never having demanded less from this world than the Christians did from God. Did not the idea of God itself, while having as its logical outcome a reasonable account of the world, also have the means to chill (the blood)? Was it not itself "unbearable"? All the more unbearable then is *that which is*, of which we know nothing (except in detached bits), about which nothing can give an explanation, and whose fullest expression is to be found only in man's powerlessness and death. I do not doubt that by withdrawing from what is reassuring, we draw near to ourselves, to that divine moment that is dying within us, that already has the strangeness of laughter, the beauty of an agonizing silence. We have known for a long time that nothing can be found in God that we cannot find in ourselves. In so far as useful action has not neutralized man, he himself is God, destined for the continual rapture of an "unbearable" joy. Neutralized man no longer bears this agonizing dignity. Today it is art alone which inherits, before our very eyes, the *delirious* role and character of religions. Today it is art which gnaws at and transfigures us, which expresses with its so-called falsehoods a truth that is empty at last of precise meaning.

I am not unaware that human *thought* turns entirely away from the object about which I am speaking, and which is *what we supremely are*. Thought does this infallibly. With no less necessity do our eyes turn away from the dazzling sun.

For those who wish to limit their perceptions to the vision of the disinherited, these notions are but the delirium of a writer. . . . I am wary of protesting. But at your invitation, I am writing to you and to those who resemble us, and you apprehend my subject matter better than I, for you have the advantage of never *spinning it into essays*. Do you believe that such a subject does not require a choice from those who assume it? A book that is often despised, but which nonetheless bears witness to one of those extreme moments where human destiny seeks itself, recounts that no one can serve two masters. I myself would say that, however much one might desire it, no one can serve *one master* (whoever it may be) without denying the sovereignty of life within himself. In spite of the useful character of judge and benefactor attributed to God, the incompatibility formulated by the Gospel is nonetheless, at the outset, the very incompatibility between practical activity and the subject of my discourse.

By definition, one cannot do without useful activity. It is one thing to respond to the sad dictates of necessity, to allow it to take the lead when we form those judgments which determine our conduct. It is something very different to make of the sorrows of man the supreme judge and ultimate value, and to accept only the object of my discourse as *sovereign*. On the one hand, one receives life in an attitude of submission as a burden and a source of obligation. In this way, a *negative* morality matches the servile need of a constraint which no one, without committing a crime, may contest. On the other hand, life is the desire for what can be loved limitlessly, and morality here is *positive*. This morality gives value exclusively to desire and to its object. It is commonly maintained that an incompatibility exists between literature and puerile morality (it has been said that one does not make fine literature with fine sentiments). In order to make our position clear, should we not in return indicate that literature, like *dreaming*, is the expression of desire—of the object of desire—and, consequently, of the absence of constraint and of nimble disobedience?

"Literature and the right to death" denies the seriousness of the question: "What is literature?" which "has received only insignificant answers." "Literature . . . seems to be that vacant element . . . to which reflection, following its own gravity, cannot return without losing its seriousness." But can we not say that this element is precisely the absolutely sovereign object about which I am speaking, and which, manifesting only itself through language, is

nevertheless but a void at the heart of language? For language "signifies," and literature deprives phrases of the power to designate anything other than my object. The reason it is so difficult to speak about this object, is that it never appears, not even from the instant I speak of it; for language, it would seem, "is a specific moment of action, and cannot be understood apart from action" (Sartre).

Under these circumstances, the poverty of literature is great; it is a confusion resulting from the powerlessness of language to designate the useless and the superfluous, namely, that human attitude which transcends useful activity (or activity seen in the light of its usefulness). For us, for whom in fact literature was the privileged concern, nothing counts more than books,—books that we read or that we write,—except perhaps what they foster, and we take this inevitable poverty upon ourselves.

To be a writer is nothing less than the possession of the inner ability to add another line to the drawing of that disconcerting vision which fills us with wonder while it terrifies,—it is man's incessant vision of himself. We who write are well aware that humanity could easily do without the images that we create. Even supposing that (one's) literary pastime be diminished to a subservience to action, the wonder of it nevertheless remains! The immediate ineffectiveness of oppression and falsehood is even greater than the inadequacy of authentic literature—there is merely a widening of silence and darkness.

This silence and darkness, however, prepare the muffled crack and tremulous glimmering of fresh thunderstorms; they prepare *the return* of a sovereign conduct that cannot be harnessed to the downward pull of self-interest. It is the writer's task to have silence as his only choice, silence or a threatening sovereignty. Aside from his other major cares, he can only form those fascinating images—innumerable and false—dissipated by recourse to the "signification" of language, but where lost humanity rediscovers itself. The writer does not abolish mankind's need to maintain its existence or the allocation of sustenance among men, nor can he refuse part of his free time for these ends. Nevertheless, he sets the limits of his submission which itself is limited and ineluctable. It is in him and through him that man learns how he himself remains forever elusive, being essentially unpredictable, and how knowledge must finally be resolved into the simplicity of emotion. It is in and through the writer that existence, in a general way, is what a girl is to the man who desires

her, whether she love or spurn him, bring him pleasure or despair. The incompatibility of literature and "engagement," which is compulsory, is precisely therefore one of opposites. Never did an "*homme engagé*" ever write anything which wasn't untruth, and which did not go beyond commitment (engagement). If it appears to be otherwise, it is because the commitment in question is not the result of a choice corresponding to a feeling of responsibility or obligation, but is the effect of a passion, of an insurmountable desire which *never left one free to choose*. On the contrary, the commitment whose meaning and binding strength derive from the fear of hunger, enslavement, or the death of others, leads away from literature (petty, at the very least) to a search for the constraints of an unquestionably pressing action; to action to which it would be cowardly or futile not to dedicate oneself entirely. If there is some reason to act, it should be expressed in terms as unliterary as can be.

It is clear that the authentic writer who does not write for paltry reasons or for reasons too shameful to mention, cannot, without uttering platitudes, form his work so as to contribute to the designs of social utility. Insofar as his writing is useful, it will not partake of sovereign truth. Rather, it would drift toward a resigned submission where not only the life of one, but the lives of many men, would remain untouched, and what is humanly sovereign unattained.

Even if the incompatibility between literature and "engagement", were fundamental, it cannot always contradict the facts. The demands of useful action sometimes involve the entirety of one's life. In danger, urgency, or humiliation, there is no more room for the superfluous. From that moment on, *there are no further choices*. One has justly put forward the case of Richard Wright: a black man from the American South who was unable to free himself from the constraints that weighed upon his fellow-men, and who wrote within this framework. These circumstances came to him from the outside; he had thus not *chosen* to be committed. On this subject, Jean-Paul Sartre remarked that "Wright, writing for a tragically divided readership, was able simultaneously to preserve this tear and go beyond it; he made it the pretext for the work of art." It is not essentially unusual for a theoretician of literary "engagement" to situate the work of art—which, indeed, uselessly exceeds the given circumstances—beyond commitment, nor for a theoretician of choice to stress the fact that Wright was unable to choose, and to do so without drawing the conclusions. What is hard to bear is the freedom of preference which

precedes the demands made by the external world, and where the author chooses out of conviction to proselytize. He thus intentionally denies the meaning and the occurrence of that margin of "useless passion," of vain and sovereign existence, which is generally the privilege of humanity. There is then less chance, in spite of him, that this margin emerge in the guise of an authentic work of art, as in the case of Wright for whom, in the end, preaching is only a pretext. If the urgency is genuine, if a choice is no longer offered, it will always be possible to reserve, perhaps tacitly, the return of the moment when urgency will have ceased. Choice alone, if it is freely made, *subordinates* to commitment what, being sovereign, can only exist with sovereign power.

It may seem vain to linger for so long over a doctrine which probably only reached the minds of the anguished—those troubled by a freedom whose nature was both too great and too vague. Moreover, the least one can say is that this doctrine was unable to establish a precise and strict requirement. In practice, everything had to remain vague, and with the help of natural inconsistency. . . . Furthermore, the author himself has implicitly recognized the contradiction he has come up against: his moral philosophy, an entirely personal one, is based on freedom directed towards choice, but the object of choice is always . . . a sign of traditional morality. These two moral doctrines are autonomous, and, to this day, one has not found the means of moving from one to the other. This problem is not superficial. Sartre himself admits that the edifice of the old moral philosophy is worm-eaten, and that his thought has succeeded in undermining what remains . . .

If by following these paths I arrive at the most general of propositions, it appears in the first place that commitment's simplistic blunder brings to light the contrary of what it was looking for. (I have affirmed the exact opposite of what Sartre says about literature.) These viewpoints immediately and gracefully combine. In the second place, it seems to me opportune not to take into account the received opinions concerning the *minor* significance of literature.

Though the problems I have dealt with have other consequences, allow me to present them in a form that henceforth will permit us to intensify an incompatibility, whose misapprehension debased at once life and action, action itself, and literature and politics.

If we give first priority to literature, we must at the same time admit how little the increase of society's resources concerns us.

Whoever is in charge of useful activity,—in the sense of a general increase of strength,—assumes interests opposed to the interests of literature. In the traditional family, the poet squanders the patrimony and is cursed; if it strictly obeyed the principle of utility, society would consider the writer to be a waster of resources who does not serve the principle of the society that nourishes him. I personally understand the “good man” who deems it a good thing to do away with or subjugate the writer. This shows that he takes seriously the urgency of the situation. It is perhaps simply the proof of this urgency.

Without renouncing his function, the writer may find himself in agreement with a rational political action aimed at increasing the strength of society. He may even support it in his writings if such action is a negation of the existing state of affairs. If his partisans are in power, he may choose not to combat their measures, choose not to remain silent. Only by denying himself, however, does he lend his support. If he does this, he may confer the authority of his name to his allegiance. The spirit, on the other hand, that gives meaning to this name, cannot follow this example. Whether the writer wants it or not, the spirit of literature always sides with squandering, with the absence of definite goals, and with passion whose only purpose is to eat away at itself, to play the part of gnawing remorse. Literature, when it is not indulgently considered to be a minor distraction, always takes a direction opposite the path of utility along which every society must be directed.

You will forgive me if I conclude with some considerations that are no doubt painfully theoretical, but which will clarify what I am trying to say.

It is no longer relevant to say that the writer is right, and that society that rules is wrong. Both have always been right *and* wrong. Only with calm can one see where the matter stands: two incompatible currents stimulate economic society which will always pit the *ruled* against the *rulers*. The rulers try to produce as much as possible and to reduce consumption. This division can moreover be found in each one of us. Those who are ruled want to consume as much as possible, and to work as little as they can. Now literature itself is consumption and on the whole, the literati are by nature in agreement with those inclined to squander.

What has always prevented one from reaching a decision about this opposition and these fundamental affinities, is that ordinarily, on

the side of the consumers, everybody is tugging every which way. Furthermore, the strongest in society, in trying to outdo each other, granted themselves a power over and above the direction of the economy. In fact, the king and the nobility, leaving production management in the hands of the bourgeoisie, did their best to levy a great quantity of consumable products. The Church which took upon itself, in agreement with the nobility, the responsibility of raising sovereign figures above the people, used their immense prestige in the levying of yet another portion. The government of the regime which preceded democracy—royal, feudal, ecclesiastical—had a good sense of the compromise by which the sovereignty, divided superficially enough into opposite domains, *the spiritual and the temporal*, was unduly made to serve both the public good and the special interests of those in power. Indeed, an absolute sovereign attitude would be akin to sacrifice, and not to power or to the appropriation of wealth. Power and the abuse of power by a seventeenth-century sovereign subordinated the sovereign attitude to something other than itself. That attitude is nothing other than the authenticity of man; otherwise, it does not exist. If it serves ends other than itself, it is obviously no longer authentic (in short, to be sovereign is to serve no ends other than the ends of sovereignty). The moment of sovereignty's appearance must decisively prevail over the "political" and financial consequences of its manifestation. It goes without saying that this appearance does not come about by an act of authority, but through a pact with limitless desire. It seems that in the distant past, both gods and kings were slain or paralyzed by sovereignty. Royal sovereignty whose prestige has been or is being ruined, is a degraded sovereignty that, for a long time, has compromised with military power, a power residing with the commander-in-chief of the army. Nothing is farther from the holiness and violence of an authentic moment.

When it was simply the discreet auxiliary to religious or princely prestige, literature, along with art, clearly had no autonomy—it long answered to commands or expectations which revealed its inferiority. Yet from the outset, as soon as literature, avoiding authorial vanity, lays claim to vanity's opposite, sovereignty itself,—at large in the active and irreconcilable world,—it shows itself to be what it always was in spite of its many compromises: a movement irreducible to the aims of social utility. This movement is often taken into account in the basest calculations, but its essence is never debased in spite of its manifestation in particular cases. The truth is that its debasement is

only a semblance. Bestsellers and the most servile of poems leave the freedom of poetry or of the novel intact, a freedom which the purest among us may still attain. Legal authority, on the other hand, through irremediable confusion, has ruined the sovereignty of princes and of priests.

By inheriting the divine prestige of these priests and princes, the modern writer most certainly receives at once the richest and the most formidable of inheritances. With good reason is "cursed" the epithet given to their heir's novel dignity. This "curse" may in fact be fortunate (aleatory though it be). What the prince welcomed as the most legitimate and enviable of blessings, the writer receives as a sad accession. His lot consists above all of his guilty conscience, an awareness of the impotence of words, and . . . the hope of never being understood! His "holiness" and his "royalty," perhaps his "divinity," appear at best to humiliate him. Far from being authentically sovereign and divine, what ruins him is the despair, or deeper down, the remorse that he is not God. . . . For he does not authentically possess a divine nature; and, nevertheless, he is not free not to be God!

Born from the decline of a sacred world that died from splendors both deceitful and colorless, *modern* literature at its birth seems more akin to death than does its fallen predecessor. This kinship is misleading. It nevertheless is charged with those disarming conditions that make one feel oneself alone to be "the salt of the earth." The *modern* writer can maintain a relation with productive society only by requiring from that society a protected reserve where, in place of the principle of utility, there reigns openly the denial of "signification," the non-meaning of what is first given to the mind as a finished coherence, an appeal to sensibility without discernable content, to emotion so vivid that it leaves to explication only a contemptible share. Without self-denial, however, or better yet, without lassitude, no one may have recourse to this explosion of untruths that compensate for those of royalty and the Church, and which differ only on one point: they, unlike those of the Church and of royalty, profess themselves to be untruths. The religious and royal hereditary myths were taken to be true. However, the non-meaning of modern literature is more profound than that of stones, for being non-meaning itself, it is the only conceivable meaning that man can still give to the imaginary object of his desire. Such perfect abnegation requires indifference, or rather, the maturity of a dead man. If literature is the silence of

significations, it is in truth the prison whose every occupant wishes to escape.

The modern writer though, in compensation for these woes, wins a major privilege over those "kings" whom he succeeds; by renouncing the power which was the minor privilege of "kings," he acquires the major privilege of being able to do *nothing* and to limit himself within an *active* society to the paralysis of death before the fact.

It is too late today to look for an expedient! If the *modern* writer does not yet know what is incumbent upon him,—and the honesty, the rigor, and the lucid humility which this requires,—it matters little. From that moment on, he renounces a sovereign character, incompatible with error. Sovereignty, he should have known, did not bring him aid, but destruction. What he could have asked of sovereignty was to make of him a living corpse, a gay one perhaps, but one gnawed from within by death.

You know that this letter in its entirety is the only true expression I can give to my friendship for you.

Translated by Christopher Carsten